

## The Urgency of Now! for FASD Children And Harris County Taxpayers

By Ray Andrews and Dori Wind

On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month, the United States and the international community will commemorate Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Awareness Day. If you have never heard of this day, or do not know about these devastating illnesses, then The Urgency of Now\* is to learn about them!

Search Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) on your computer. Stories will appear about children born with conditions including: severe mental retardation, physical abnormalities, learning disabilities, and cognitive deficiencies. You will find that FASD refers to a continuum of health problems that arise as a result of a fetus being prenatally exposed to alcohol. You will learn a diagnosis of FASD can be hard to make unless a mother discusses her drinking with her doctor, or the child's doctor. Therefore, many FASD children may be diagnosed as having:

- autism
- ADHD
- oppositional defiant or conduct disorder
- pervasive developmental delay
- learning disabilities
- emotional/behavior problems
- reactive attachment disorder
- and many more...

***or they are never diagnosed at all.*** Many times adoptive families struggle with a child's problems, never knowing why their child is so different. A major reason the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services must remove children from their families is because their parents abuse alcohol and drugs. It is estimated that as many as 70% of children in foster care may be affected by FASD.

Some of the most common characteristics of alcohol-related brain damage include: poor impulse control and poor problem solving skills, difficulty linking actions to consequences, poor social communication (inability to "read" situations and adapt behavior accordingly), limited abstract reasoning and lack of trial and error learning. Also, people with FASD have great difficulty internalizing values, feelings and laws and can develop inappropriate social, sexual and sociopathic behaviors.

A recent study from Canada looked at social-cognition and emotion-processing abilities of children. Joanne Rovet, a professor at the University of Toronto and senior scientist in neurosciences and mental health at the Hospital for Sick Children, and supervisor of the study, said "Our findings show that ... overall, children with FASD have more severe behavioral problems. In terms of social cognition and emotional processing, the core deficit in FASD appears to be in understanding and interpreting another's mental states and emotions." Rovet added that a "profile" of children with

FASD would include items such as high distractibility and restlessness, as well as behaviors often described as "out of control" and juvenile.

"Based on previous work from our lab, children and adolescents with FASD were more likely than children with ADHD to engage in antisocial behaviors, such as cheating, . . . as well as sociopathic behaviors including lying and stealing," she said. "Importantly, the findings from our present study, specifically the significant differences in social cognition and emotional processing between children with FASD and ADHD, may underlie the severe conduct problems observed in children prenatally exposed to alcohol." ( *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* (2009, July 20). *Children With Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Have More Severe Behavioral Problems Than Children With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Study Finds.* ScienceDaily. Retrieved August 3, 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/07/090716164335.htm>)

In an article in The Juneau Empire in 2001, Ann Chandonnet wrote the following about an FASD jail project.

"It's easy to accept that alcohol can fuel drunk drivers, but harder to accept that alcohol in expectant mothers can create felons."

Researchers in this project guessed that about 20% of this Alaska jail population would suffer from FAS/FASD. A District Court Judge began including an FAS diagnosis in his sentences. What the researchers discovered was that the 20% guess was a dramatic underestimate. They anticipated 10-12 referrals per year, but had 15-20 in the first month.

The American Academy of Pediatrics explains to us in their parenting book, **Caring for Your Baby and Young Child Birth to Age 5**, (Fourth Edition, 2005) that "Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is one of the leading preventable causes of birth defects, mental retardation, and other developmental disorders in newborns. There is no known safe amount of alcohol consumption during pregnancy." Women who are pregnant, or who are planning to become pregnant, should abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages of any kind. Alcohol is a teratogenic drug, which means it can stop or disturb growth and development of a fetus.

Educating mothers to not drink while trying to get pregnant or during pregnancy, will not only result in an increase in healthy children, but will also cause a decrease in the numerous social services needed by FASD children and adults. The Harris County Intellectual and Development Disabilities Needs Counsel has a brochure online at [www.mrnc.hctx.net](http://www.mrnc.hctx.net) that tells taxpayers that each FAS (the worst symptoms of the FASD disorders) child can cost about \$5 million dollars. This number includes costs for medical care, psychiatric care, special education, foster care, residential care, SSI and other needs.

The Urgency of helping Texas' children and taxpayers is Now. Fans who attend baseball games at Minute Maid Park will see signs near cash registers where alcohol is sold, stating alcohol can cause cancer and birth defects. Bar and restaurant patrons can read signs on bathroom walls discussing alcohol and pregnancy. We know that smoking can cause cancer. Now we must learn that a pregnant woman never drinks alone.

We must resolve that The Urgency of Now is to understand that alcohol can devastate a child's life. Research from the University of Washington Medical School tells us that in a study of more than 400 FASD children, these children had problems in school, trouble with the law and a propensity to abuse alcohol. As they became adults, only about 15% of them could keep a job, find housing, or live independently.

Unable to care for themselves or to interact with others, how will these individuals survive? The Coalition for the Homeless Houston/Harris County tells us on its website, [www.homelesshouston.org](http://www.homelesshouston.org) 10,000 men, women and children live on the streets of Houston today. The Houston Chronicle writes that the Harris County Jail is the largest mental hospital in the State of Texas. Through no fault of their own, FASD individuals will end up on our streets, or in our jails or mental institutions. And yet their conditions were preventable.

Studies show that Texas is a national leader in the numbers of teen pregnancies, and underage and binge drinking by young people. Alcohol continues to be the most widely used substance among secondary school students, and the most commonly abused by female adolescents. There are roughly a million American teens pregnant each year with 78% of these pregnancies identified as being unintended.

The Texas Office for Prevention of Developmental Disabilities currently posts a Guest Columnist article from Dr. Larry Burd at its website [www.topdd.state.tx.us](http://www.topdd.state.tx.us). Dr. Burd, a renowned FASD researcher said: "Each year in Texas about 3,667 infants with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders are born. The lifetime cost for each of these infants is \$2.4 million. Based on current data few will ever be able to live without ongoing supports and many will require residential care. For such a severe and costly disorder, greatly improved prevention efforts are required." (Dr. Burd's estimate of \$2.4 million is per FASD child, and the Harris County estimate of about \$5 million is per FAS child). Billions of tax dollars are and will be needed to care for these children.

Putting the 3,667 number in perspective, these children would fill about 6 (based on average enrollment) elementary schools annually in HISD. Three years of this number would match the number of prisoners in the Harris County Jail (presently about 11,000) or the number of Houston's homeless population. "Drink Responsibly," says the liquor industry as it creates and markets to young women, products called alcopops, lemonade flavored drinks, jello shots and wine coolers. At the very least the industry needs to act responsibly by putting **BIG BOLD** warnings on these products.

Currently, Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan is being responsible to our children by filing suit against Spec's Liquor for building a store within the prohibited area of a school. And, The Urgency of Now and the Houston FASD Consortium are being responsible by educating our community about what can happen when mothers drink during pregnancy. Kathy Mitchell, vice president and national spokesperson for the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS) spoke to our community at

the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual FASD Conference to be held at the Houston Council on Alcohol & Drugs on October 16, 2009.

The Urgency to have healthy children is Now! The Urgency of reducing government costs to pay for these totally preventable disorders is Now!

*(The Urgency of Now! is a five year strategic plan from The Houston/Harris County Office of Drug Policy dedicated to comprehensively addressing issues concerning the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Ray Andrews is the Director for the City of Houston, Houston Crackdown, Office of the Mayor and the head of this strategic five year plan. Dori Wind is Special Counsel with the Office of Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan and has worked with Harris County Protective Services, the Harris County Hospital District, the Harris County Guardianship Program, Harris County Jail Diversion and The Houston FASD Consortium. For information on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual FASD Conference contact Jeanne Anorga at 713-970-7657).*